The Great Simile of the Elephant's Footprint

A study in the deconstruction of self and the nature of reality.

Based on the Mahāhatthipadopamasutta (MN 28)

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One Teaching to Encompass All Skillful Qualities

Sāriputta explains: “The footprints of all creatures that walk can fit inside an elephant’s footprint, so an elephant’s footprint is said to be the biggest of them all. In the same way, all skillful qualities are included in the four noble truths.”

- The truth of suffering.
- The truth of the origin of suffering.
- The truth of the cessation of suffering.
- The truth of the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering.

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Suffering is Defined as the Five Grasping Aggregates

> “Rebirth is suffering; old age is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress are suffering... In brief, the five grasping aggregates are suffering.”

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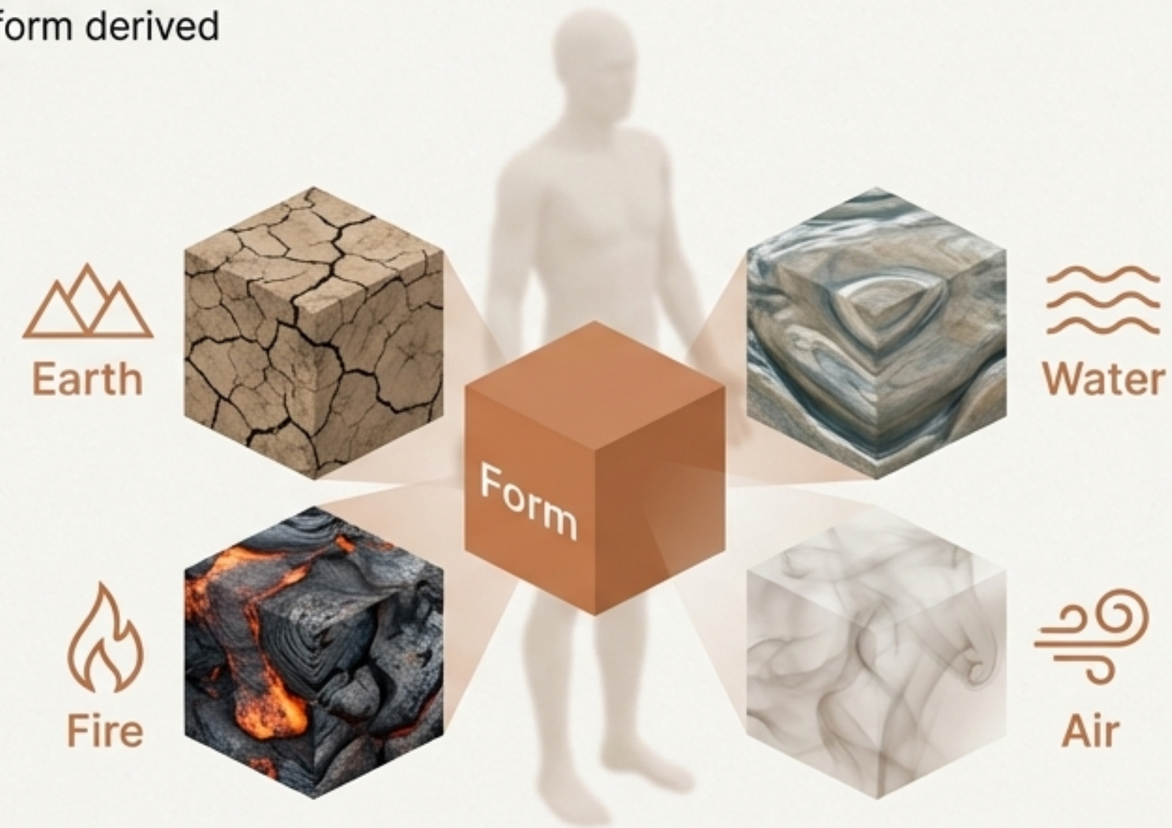
The Aggregate of Form is Deconstructed into Four Principal States

“And what is the grasping aggregate of form?
The four principal states, and form derived
from the four principal states.”



This begins the analytical meditation: a direct investigation into the nature of the body.

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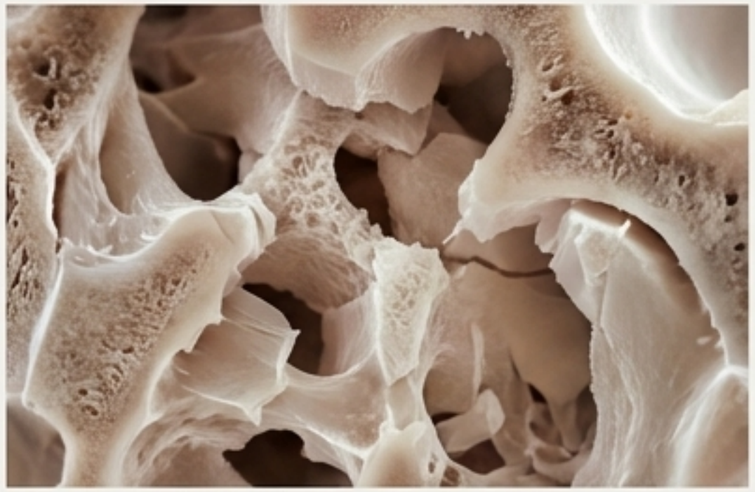
The Earth Element: Solidity, Inside and Out



Interior Earth

"Anything internal, personal, that's hard, solid, and appropriated."

head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, undigested food, feces.

"This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self."

Exterior Earth

"There comes a time when the exterior water element flares up. At that time the exterior earth element vanishes... revealed as impermanent, liable to end, vanish, and perish."

"What then of this ephemeral body appropriated by craving?"

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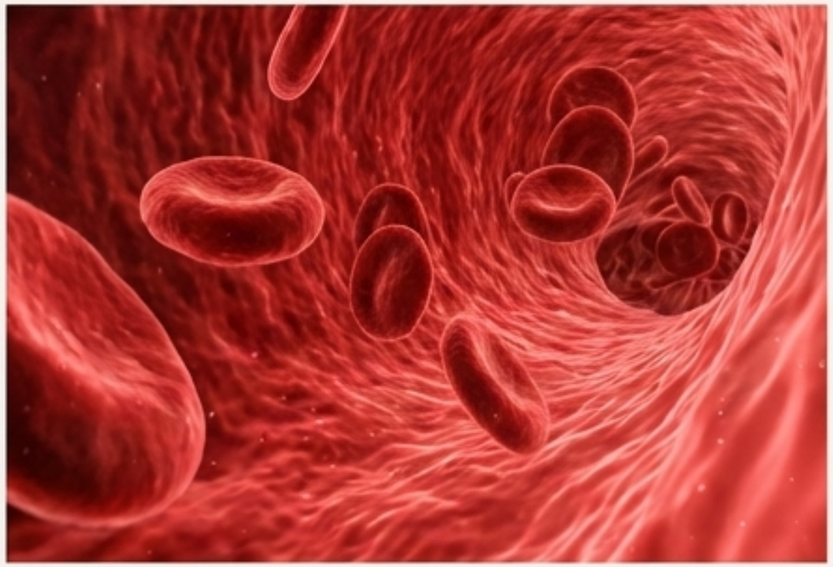
The Water Element: Cohesion, Inside and Out

Interior Water



"Anything internal, personal, that's water, watery, and appropriated."

bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine.

"This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self."

Exterior Water

"There comes a time when the water in the great ocean sinks down... when there's not even enough water left to wet the tip of the toe... revealed as impermanent."

"When you truly see with right understanding, you grow disillusioned with the water element."

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The Fire Element: Temperature, Inside and Out

Interior Fire

‘Anything internal… that’s fire, fiery, and appropriated.’

- that which warms,
- that which ages,
- that which heats you up when feverish,
- that which properly digests food and drink.

Exterior Fire

‘It burns up villages, towns, cities… until it reaches a cliff’s edge… where it's extinguished due to not being fed… revealed as impermanent.’

‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self.’

‘When you truly see with right understanding… detaching the mind from the fire element.’

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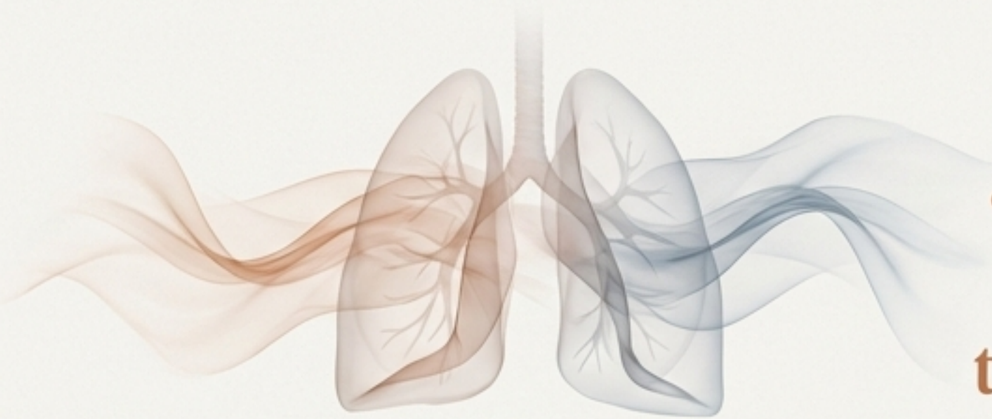
The Air Element: Motion, Inside and Out

Interior Air



"Anything internal... that's air, airy, and appropriated."

winds that go up or down,
winds in the belly or the bowels,
winds that flow through the limbs,
in-breaths and out-breaths.

**"This is not mine,
I am not this,
this is not my self."**

Exterior Air

"It sweeps away villages, towns, cities...

There comes a time... when even the grasses
in the drip-fringe of a thatch roof don't stir...
revealed as impermanent."

"What then of this ephemeral body appropriated by craving?
Rather than 'I' or 'mine' or 'I am', they consider it to be none of these things."

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The Result of Insight: An Unshakeable Mind

Others might treat that mendicant with disliking, loathing, and detestation, striking them with fists, stones, sticks, and swords. They understand: ‘This body is such that fists, stones, sticks, and swords strike it.”

> “But the Buddha has said in the Advice on the Simile of the Saw: ‘Even if low-down bandits were to sever you limb from limb with a two-handed saw, anyone who had a malevolent thought on that account would not be following my instructions.’”

“My energy shall be roused up and unflagging… my mind immersed in samādhi and unified. Gladly now, let fists, stones, sticks, and swords strike this body! For this is how the instructions of the Buddhas are followed.”

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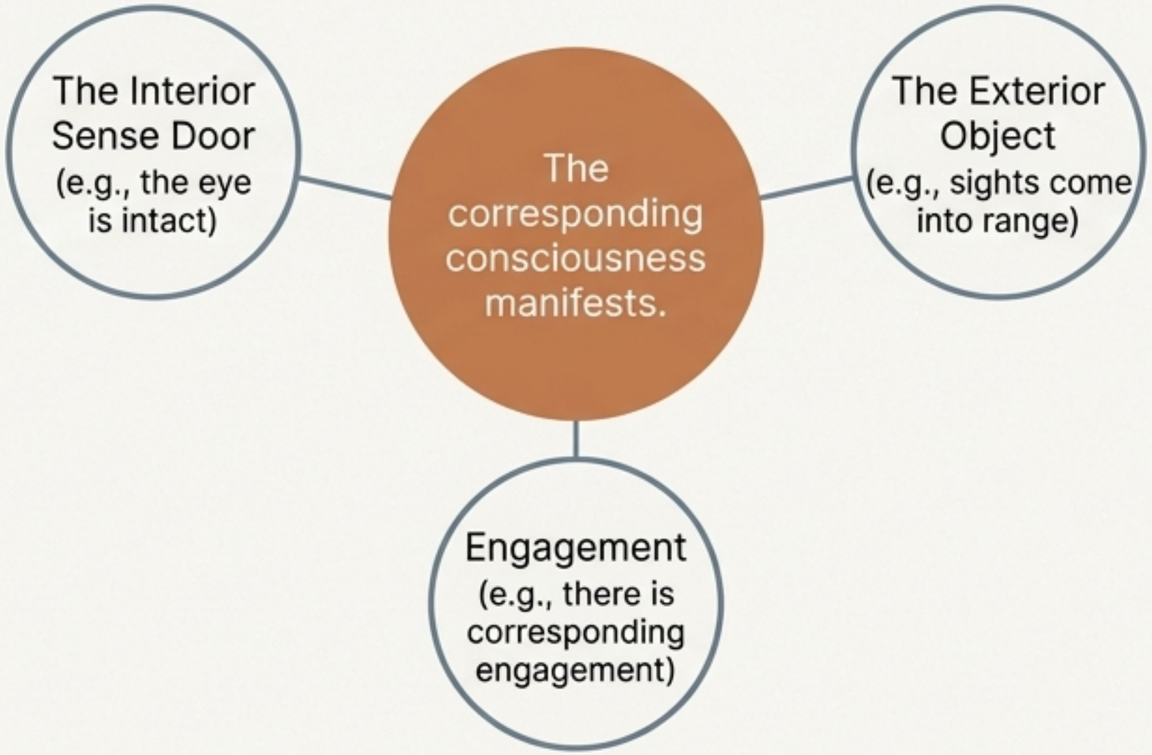
Experience is a Process, Not a Substance



“Though the interior eye is intact and exterior sights come into range, so long as there’s no corresponding engagement, there’s no manifestation of the corresponding type of consciousness. But when all three are present, there is manifestation.”

This process applies to all six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

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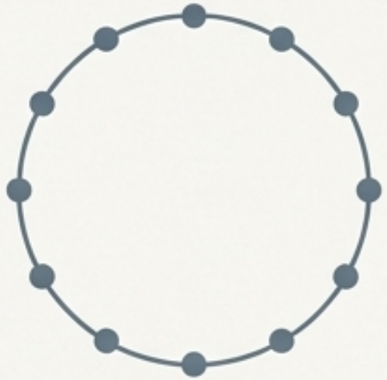
The Insight That Unlocks the Teaching

They understand: ‘So this is how there comes to be inclusion, gathering together, and assimilation into these five grasping aggregates. And these five five grasping aggregates are indeed dependently originated.’

“One who sees dependent origination sees the teaching. One who sees the teaching sees dependent origination.”



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Seeing the Cause of Suffering, and the Path to its End

The Origin of Suffering

"The desire, clinging, attraction, and attachment for these five grasping aggregates is the origin of suffering."

The Cessation of Suffering

"Giving up and getting rid of desire and greed for these five grasping aggregates is the cessation of suffering."

"At this point, much has been done by that mendicant."

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The Footprint Contains the Path

The simile of the elephant's footprint reveals its full meaning. By systematically deconstructing the very components of our perceived self—from form down to the elements—we discover the dependently originated nature of reality.

In seeing this, we see the cause of suffering and the clear path to its end. All skillful qualities are indeed found within this single, comprehensive teaching.

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